

Interactive Teacher Training

By Patricia Ann Previdi

Most EFL teachers today carefully plan lessons that actively involve their students in the learning process. Yet an interactive component is often lacking. In teacher training classes, frequently teachers receive lectures about how to make their classes more interactive, but they do not have opportunities to experience such interaction in their training classes.

This article describes an interactive EFL methodology course for elementary school teachers. The class used an input loop methodology, which means that the instructors in the methodology class are not only lecturing about a particular technique, but they are actually modeling the technique in their teaching. In this case, the instructors of the methodology class are training teachers to use interactive activities in their classrooms while they are using interactive techniques in class. Although the focus in this particular course is on elementary school methodology, the techniques can be adapted to all levels of teacher training and development.

The syllabus for this course was quite traditional and included such topics as major approaches to EFL teaching, language acquisition, and child development theories, as well as techniques for teaching listening, speaking, reading, and writing. What made the class unique, however, was that students were actively involved in the learning process, rather than being passive notetakers.

Inductive Teaching Task

This interaction was fostered by using inductive teaching. For example, in the class on the language experience approach, the students participated in the following activities. At the beginning of the class, they completed an experiment in which two white carnations changed color after being placed in colored water. The students were asked to explain why this had occurred.

While they were doing this, the groups circulated among the various learning stations around the room. Since the theme of the activity was color, at the listening station the students listened to the song "De Colores." In addition to answering questions about the song's message, they were asked to think about the colors that they see in their environment. At the painting station, students painted what they had observed in the experiment with the flowers. At the conversation corner, they talked about their favorite colors and discussed how favorite colors reflect different personalities. At the reading station, students read about prisms and answered questions about the relationship of prisms to color. Finally, students saw and reacted to the U.S. public television video "Bill Nye, the Science Guy, and Colors."

After the groups had visited each station, they returned to their seats and wrote about what they had experienced. The principles of the language experience approach were then drawn from the activity that had occurred. In this approach, the students are provided with a common experience. At beginning levels, they tell the teacher about the experience, and they write about the event. At more advanced levels, the students record their own experiences.

Physical Movement Task

Another technique that increases the active involvement of the students is physical movement. One such activity is the value line. In this task, students are asked to line up on a continuum according to their opinions about an issue. Students who agree with an issue place themselves at one end of the line, and those who disagree stand at the other end. Students who have no strong opinions place themselves nearer the middle.

For example, in the elementary school methods class, the students were asked to stand up and place themselves in a line according to their beliefs about how much of the native language should be used in an English class. Students who believed in free use of the native language stood at one end of the line, and those who believed that only English should be used stood at the other end. Students with no strong opinions placed themselves in the center. After forming the line, students at each end of the line had to defend their positions, while students in the middle had to explain why they had placed themselves there. This activity can be used anytime students are asked to draw conclusions or form opinions.

Another task that involved movement was used in reporting the results of group work. After the groups finished designing activities or responding to questions, they posted the results of their work on large sheets of paper at various locations around the room. The students then moved around the room to read the results of the other groups.

Cooperative Learning Activities

Several techniques from cooperative learning also facilitated interactions among students in the course. Two examples of this are "think, pair, share" and "jigsaw reading." Think, pair, share is a technique in which students are given a question or problem to solve. First, students are given time to think individually about the solution. Then they work in pairs and compare solutions. Finally, each pair shares its solution with the class. For instance, in the elementary school methods class, students were asked to think about how they could apply the Piaget's principles of child development to real situations. Next they discussed their applications with partners, and finally they shared their suggestions with the class.

Jigsaw reading, another cooperative learning technique, involves the students actively in the class. First, students are placed in groups. Then they are given the first and the last paragraphs in the article to read. In addition, they are given another paragraph in the article to read and interpret. After discussing the nuances of the paragraph within their groups, the students present the content of their selections to the class. This technique helps learners manage more difficult or extensive readings.

Warm-up Tasks

Warm-up activities, which are considered a valuable component of interactive classes, were included as interactive activities in the elementary school methods course. Each class began with a warm-up activity. In one example, students were shown cartoons about English language teaching and asked to comment on them, or students were given riddles or puzzles to solve. Other warm-up tasks included contests such as grammar review games, cloze completions, and problem-solving tasks.

Demonstrations

Demonstrations were an integral part of the course since they encouraged active student participation. After each major unit of the course, students were required to demonstrate the principles and techniques they had learned. These presentations were done on the group and individual work dealing with material design and microteaching. Students wrote handouts, designed tasks that reflected the principles of the course, and shared their materials with the class. They were required to write presentations and practice and evaluate materials for each of the macroskills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—as well as grammar and vocabulary acquisition.

In microteaching, the students presented minilessons to demonstrate their knowledge of the various approaches to English teaching, as well as the major techniques that they had acquired in the course. Some of these were skill integration, whole language, cooperative learning, use of games, and language learning strategies.

The course also included hands-on activities in which the students learned about the characteristics of effective visuals and objects, and actually applied these principles when they created and designed the visuals. Some examples were the color sound charts for the Silent Way Approach, picture vocabulary charts, and study skill checklists. Objects created included verb cubes and wheels, paper digital clocks, vocabulary dominoes, and game boards.

Communication among the students and information sharing contributed to actively involving the students in the class and enriched their experiences. Students discussed ideas in pairs, trios, and larger groups. Students worked together to solve problems such as classroom management issues. They debated the positive and negative aspects of error correction, applied the principles of language acquisition to lesson planning, and designed materials and activities. In addition to contributing to the interactive nature of the class, the extensive communications increased the students' English proficiency levels.

Other Activities

Students active participation was also incorporated into the review components of the class. For instance, after students were taught the major approaches, they were given large cards with the names of the approaches and several small cards with the principles of each approach. In groups, the students had to sort out the principles and place these cards under the language teaching approach that included these components. This technique can be used in any training class after a concept that has several subpoints has been taught.

Another approach was used to review terminology. In this technique, some students were given cards with definitions of terms while other students received cards with the terms. Students had to move about the room until they could match the definition with the term. This activity can help students with the review of any type of terminology.

Conclusion

These techniques and approaches described can be incorporated into any teacher training class to encourage students to take a more active role in their learning process. In addition to learning about the theories of interactive instruction, students actually participate in the models, thereby making the models more realistic and easier to apply in their own teaching situations. Furthermore, after seeing how these techniques are actually used in real classroom situations, future teachers are more likely to use the techniques with their own students.

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